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Moscow's View of the US-Iranian Hostage Crisis Since
Afghanistan (U)

Soviet efforts to use the crisis in US-Iranian relations to improve Moscow's ties with the Khomeini regime have met with little success to date, largely because of the invasion of Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the Soviets have welcomed the prolongation of the US-Iran crisis and hope it will prevent the United States from regaining a position of influence in Iran. While the USSR has not openly opposed the eventual release of the hostages, it sees their continued retention and the resulting friction between the United States and Iran as helpful to the pursuit of its primary aim. (S)

Soviet Comments

The deterioration in US-Soviet relations since the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan has made the Soviets even less interested in supporting efforts to obtain the hostages' release. Their own relations with Iran have suffered as a result of the invasion, and they are anxious to prevent a resurgence of US influence there. [redacted]

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One recent indication of Moscow's interest in using the hostage crisis for its own purposes is Iranian President Bani-Sadr's reported recent statement that Soviet Ambassador Vinogradov was constantly seeking audiences in order to present the Soviet view on the hostage situation. Bani-Sadr indicated that the Soviets are concerned that the United States will recover the hostages without having to pay a heavy penalty. He said the Polish and Hungarian Ambassadors in Tehran, presumably at Moscow's behest, were also unsuccessfully seeking

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interviews with Bani-Sadr and Ayatollah Khomeini to urge them not to make concessions to the United States on the hostage issue. (S NF NC OC)

Bani-Sadr's reputed remarks suggest that Moscow has not tried to prolong the hostages' confinement per se but has focused on the terms of their release. Presumably the Soviets hope that release of the hostages will be accompanied by US admission of responsibility for Iran's problems. (S)

Moscow's earlier treatment of the UN commission to Iran suggested the Soviets feared that some compromise would be reached enabling Tehran and Washington to put the hostage issue behind them. After the UN commission left Iran, the Soviet-sponsored National Voice of Iran (NVOI) praised the militants for following Khomeini's line and attacked "some high-placed circles" in the Iranian Government for showing a conciliatory position toward the United States. An NVOI broadcast on 15 March criticized "certain conciliatory officials" in Iran who support compromise with the United States. These comments are clearly aimed at President Bani-Sadr and Foreign Minister Qotbzadeh who, in Moscow's view, have indicated a willingness to see the hostage issue resolved. (S)

Moscow's satisfaction with the collapse of the UN commission's efforts was suggested by Foreign Minister Gromyko's recent endorsement of Iran's "just demands" against the United States. Speaking on 17 March, he praised Iran for "giving a good example of steadfastness" in defending itself against "imperialist pressure, blackmail and threats." Moscow was also quick to seize on the Shah's movement from Panama to Egypt as further proof of US support for him and hostility to the Iranian revolution. Despite its obvious interest in intensifying the Iran-US rift, Moscow has continued to avoid any direct call for the hostages' continued confinement and has generally not outdone Khomeini. Even commentaries by NVOI, consistently more extreme in its position than the Soviet central press, have generally adhered to Khomeini's position on the hostages. (S)

Moscow's posture seems to reflect a Soviet calculation that Khomeini--rather than the Embassy militants--is the main Iranian political actor. Since Moscow's

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overriding immediate interest is the cultivation of better relations with Khomeini's regime, the Soviets undoubtedly do not want to alienate him over this issue. They may also calculate that he could quickly resolve the hostage crisis and do not want to be left in a rigid position should this occur. (S)

Moscow and the Embassy Occupiers

Allegations have been made from time to time that Moscow is directly manipulating the Embassy occupiers. While the Soviets are willing to use the Embassy seizure to their own advantage, we have no evidence of direct Soviet involvement in the occupation. We believe that the captors are what they claim to be--radical Islamic followers of Ayatollah Khomeini, many of whom are students from the campuses of Tehran's universities. (S)

The militants have carefully avoided any link to political groups outside the Embassy compound. Spokesmen for the group have frankly admitted that they would rapidly lose popular support if they were to align themselves with any political organization. We believe, therefore, that the militants would reject any contact with the Soviets, fearing this would discredit them in the eyes of Khomeini's Islamic followers. (S)

It is possible that there are indirect channels that could give the Soviets access to information about conditions at the Embassy. Some of the militants may be former members of the leftist guerrilla groups, the Cherihs and the Mujahedin, who may have received some training by radical Palestinian groups in contact with Soviets. Others among the militants may have contacts with the Soviet-supported Tudeh party. There is, however, no good evidence of such links. (S) (SECRET NOFORN-NOCONTRACT-ORCON)

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Possible Shift in Soviet Attitude Toward Middle East
Negotiations (U)

Recent comments by a Soviet Foreign Ministry official suggest that the Soviets may be considering a tactical shift in their approach to Middle East peace negotiations. During an 11 March meeting with a US official, the Acting Chief of the Foreign Ministry's Department of Near East Affairs, Pavel Akopov, conveyed a new sense of willingness to accept the Camp David accords and the Israeli-Egyptian agreements and to move on toward negotiations for a comprehensive settlement. (S)

Such an attitude would suggest increased flexibility on the part of the Soviets, who have consistently opposed the convening of any conference, including the Geneva Conference, which would accept the Camp David framework as a point of departure. While Akopov repeated standard Soviet opposition to any negotiating forum whose main function would be the endorsement of these developments, he indicated that a reconvened conference with a much broader mandate would not have to be based on a return to the status quo ante. (S)

Soviet intransigence has been based in part on the assumption that the Camp David process would ultimately founder on the autonomy issue and that the USSR would reap the benefits of a significant US failure. While their assessment with respect to the autonomy question has probably not changed, the Soviets may feel that they themselves will not benefit unless they abandon their negative stand and project a more conciliatory image. They undoubtedly recognize that their own ability to affect a settlement remains minimal, given their lack of influence with Israel; as a result, they have considerable room to maneuver on the nature of negotiations. (S)

The USSR may currently be motivated to pursue a more flexible course by the perception that a West European - Arab initiative on the Middle East, distinct from US efforts, may be developing. The French Government has

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